

The Effects of the Sustained Silent Reading Program on Cultivating Students' Habits and Attitudes in Reading Books for Leisure

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Abstract: The author examines the effects of the sustained silent reading program on cultivating students' habits and attitudes in reading books for leisure. The author used a time-series design and measured students' reading habits and attitudes three times in twelve months. It was expected that if the program created positive effects on cultivating students' habits and attitudes, significant improvements in them would appear during implementation. The results supported this expectation. After some months, the number of students reading books for leisure during the program increased. The number of students who agreed that reading books for leisure was pleasurable also increased. However, the number of students who spent more than one hour reading books for leisure after school decreased. Other programs should be launched to complement the limitations of this program.

Keywords: leisure reading, reading habits and attitudes, sustained silent reading

In studies, researchers have found a significant association between early cultivation of children's reading habits and their future success (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD] 2007). Accordingly, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated World Book and Copyright Day at its 1995 meeting as a way to encourage more people to read, publish, and be aware of the importance of protecting intellectual property (UNESCO n.d.).

More countries have joined the celebration of World Book and Copyright Day, and many programs have been designed to achieve its goal. For example, South

Africa launched a campaign, "Reading Is Forever;" Hong Kong held an Inter-School E-Book Writing Competition; and Switzerland conducted a "Politicians Read Books" campaign (UNESCO n.d.).

Despite educators and policymakers increasing recognition of the importance of reading, an international survey conducted in fifteen countries revealed a notable outcome: most children fifteen years old spend more time watching TV programs than reading (OECD 2007). This finding points to the need to invest further efforts to design effective programs to cultivate reading habits among youths.

Many reading programs targeting students have been designed and launched, including sustained silent reading (SSR), free voluntary reading (FVR), drop everything and read (DEAR), daily independent reading time (DIRT), and uninterrupted sustained silent reading (USSR). Although there are differences among them, these programs share some common features, such as letting students read silently, freely, and without interruption (Gardiner 2001).

SSR Program and Reading

Among these programs, SSR has been widely applied in schools (Bryan, Fawson, and Reutzel 2003). Lyman Hunt at the University of Vermont proposed this program in the 1960s, and U.S. public schools implemented it in the 1970s (Jensen and Jensen 2002). Researchers have reported positive outcomes of the SSR program (Cynthia 2000; Jensen and Jensen; Valeri-Gold 1995; Yoon 2002), such as an improvement in students' interests and attitudes to reading (Valeri-Gold). However, they have also reported negative outcomes of the program, such as a possible lessening of students'

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interest in reading through the practice of the SSR program (Parr and Maguiness 2005). More important, the National Reading Panel conducted a review study that did not find any positive influence of the SSR program on independent reading and reading achievement (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD] 2000).

Based on these contrasting results, more studies were clearly needed to discover the limitations of the SSR program. For example, because schools launched the SSR program in different ways (Akmal 2002; Oberlin and Shugarman 1989; Speaker 1990), what were the differences among these SSR programs? In addition, because few studies used the time-series design to monitor changes in students' reading habits during the SSR program, its effects were hard to evaluate (NICHD 2000). Moreover, because the SSR program was conducted in school, how did the program influence students' after-school reading habits?

Aims of This Study

I used the time-series design to examine the effects of the SSR program on cultivating students' habits and attitudes regarding reading books for leisure both during the SSR period and after school. I assessed students' reading habits and attitudes three times in a twelve-month period. I expected that if the SSR program did significantly influence students' habits and attitudes regarding leisure reading, improvements would be associated with the duration of implementation. Moreover, if the SSR program significantly influenced students' habits in book reading for leisure after school, improvements in reported hours of reading books for leisure after school should also be associated with the duration of implementation.

I conducted this study at a secondary school. I recruited only Form One (first year secondary education) students so that I could assess the baseline measure. The salient parts of the SSR program in this secondary school were the following: (a) a twenty-minute reading time; (b) teachers started the program in the first period and it was part of every school day; (c) students were free to choose which books to read; (d) all students, teachers, and staff were to do nothing but read books they liked; (e) class teachers acted as role models by participating in reading; (f) teachers allowed no interruption of students' reading; (g) teachers encouraged students to write notes and reflections in their reading journals.

I conducted the first measure in October 2002, after all Form One students had participated in the SSR program for one week. I assessed the second and third measures in February 2003 and October 2003, respectively. The number of respondents to the three measures were 222, 208, and 224, respectively. I asked the students to complete a questionnaire and answer the following questions:

1. To what extent did you read books for leisure actively during the SSR period?
2. What was the proportion of your classmates that engaged in reading tasks during the SSR period?
3. How many hours did you spend on reading books for leisure after school?
4. What were your attitudes toward reading books for leisure?

Method

A teacher distributed the questionnaires to students during school assembly on each occasion. I briefed all students on the methods of answering the questionnaire first and then gave them time to ask questions and twenty minutes to complete the questionnaire.

Details of the questions included were the following:

1. *Reading habits during the SSR period.* I asked students to check a box to indicate how often (*always, sometimes, seldom, or never*) they read books for leisure actively during the SSR period.
2. *Classmates' reading habits during the SSR period.* I asked students to estimate the proportion of their classmates who practiced the following behaviors during the SSR period: read books for leisure actively, chatted with one another, and did other work. I provided four response categories: most classmates did, half the classmates did, some classmates did, and no classmates did.
3. *Reading habits after school.* I asked students to report the number of hours they spent reading books for leisure after school. I gave four response categories: less than half an hour, half to one hour, one to two hours, and more than two hours.
4. *Attitudes to leisure book reading.* I asked students to check a box to indicate how much they agreed that reading books for leisure was useful, meaningful, pleasurable, and enjoyable. The five response categories were *strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree*.

Reading Habits in School

The results supported my expectation about students' reading habits during the SSR period. First, the percentages of students who always or sometimes read books for leisure actively during the SSR period were 76.85 percent, 87.92 percent, and 88.74 percent, from the first to the third measure, respectively. More students did so in the second and third measures than in the baseline, odds ratios of 2.19 and 2.37, respectively, both $ps < 0.05$ (see table 1). Second, the percentages of students who estimated half or more than half of their classmates tended to read books for leisure actively during the SSR period were 62.44 percent, 78.26 percent, and 80.54 percent, from the first to third measure, respectively. More students made this estimation in the second and third measures than in the baseline, odds ratios of 2.17 and 2.49, respectively, all $ps < 0.05$ (see table 1). Third, the percentages of students

TABLE 1. Students and Their Classmates' Behaviors in the Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) Period

Variable	Measure								
	First			Second			Third		
	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR
How often did you read books for leisure actively in the SSR period?									
Sometimes or most of the time	76.85	166	1	87.92	182	2.19*	88.74	197	2.07*
Seldom or never	23.15	50		12.08	25		11.26	25	
What proportion of your classmates read books for leisure actively in the SSR period?									
Half or more than half of my classmates	62.44	138	1	78.26	162	2.17*	80.54	178	2.49*
None or less than half of my classmates	37.56	83		21.74	45		19.46	43	
What proportion of your classmates chatted with one another in the SSR period?									
Half or more than half of my classmates	65.16	144	1	29.76	61	0.22*	23.42	52	0.16*
None or less than half of my classmates	34.84	77		70.24	144		76.58	170	
What proportion of your classmates did work that was unrelated to reading in the SSR period?									
Half or more than half of my classmates	44.09	97		21.95	45		16.29	36	
None or less than half of my classmates	55.91	123	1	78.05	160	0.36*	83.71	185	0.25*

Note. OR = odds ratio. * $p < 0.05$.

who estimated half or more than half of their classmates chatted with one another during the SSR period were 65.16 percent, 29.76 percent, and 23.42 percent, from the first to third measure, respectively. Compared with the baseline, the odds ratios of the second and the third measure were 0.22 and 0.16, respectively, both $ps < 0.05$ (see table 1). Finally, the percentages of students who estimated half or more than half of their classmates did work unrelated to reading during the SSR period were 44.09 percent, 21.95 percent, and 16.29 percent, from the first to the third measure, respectively. Compared with the baseline, the odds of the second and the third measure were 0.36 and 0.25 respectively, both $ps < 0.05$ (see table 1). Thus, the results revealed that the percentage of students who read books for leisure actively during the SSR period and the percentage of students who estimated half or more than half of their classmates engaged in reading tasks during the SSR period increased.

Reading Habits after School

My expectation for students' reading habits after school was not supported by the results. The percentage of students who spent more than one hour on reading books for leisure after school did not change significantly. Actually, the percentages of students who reported spending more than one hour on reading books for leisure after school were 23.87 percent, 14.98 percent, and 18.39 percent in the respective measures. Fewer students did so in the second and the third measure than in the baseline, odds ratios of 0.56 and 0.53, respectively, both $ps < 0.05$ (see table 2).

Students' Attitudes toward Reading

The results partially supported the expectation of the effects of the SSR program on students' attitudes toward reading books for leisure. There were more students in the third measure than in the first measure

TABLE 2. Number of Hours That Students Spent on Reading Books for Leisure after School Every Day

Variable	Measure								
	First			Second			Third		
	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR
How many hours did you spend reading books for leisure after school every day									
One hour or more	23.87	3	1	14.98	31	0.56*	18.39	41	0.71*
Less than one hour	76.13	169		85.02	176		81.61	182	

Note. OR = odds ratio. * $p < 0.05$.

who agreed or strongly agreed that reading books for leisure was pleasurable and enjoyable, odds ratios of 1.76 and 1.53, respectively, $ps < 0.05$. Nonetheless, no such difference appeared in the responses to whether they felt that reading books for leisure was useful or meaningful (see table 3).

In other words, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that reading books for leisure was pleasurable and enjoyable increased after twelve months of implementation. However, the percentage of students who agreed or strongly agreed that reading

books for leisure was useful and meaningful did not change significantly. It seemed that the SSR program improved students' affective reactions but not their cognitive reactions to reading books for leisure.

Conclusion

On the basis of these findings, I make some conclusions. First, it is possible to say that the SSR program had a significant effect on cultivating students' reading habits in the SSR period. Second, the program had a significant effect on cultivating students' pleasure in

TABLE 3. Students' Attitudes toward Reading Books for Leisure

Variable	Measure								
	First			Second			Third		
	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR	%	<i>n</i>	OR
Useful									
Agree or strongly agree	73.42	163	1	65.71	136	0.69	65.92	147	0.70
Neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree	26.58	59		34.31	71		34.08	76	
Meaningful									
Agree or strongly agree	67.57	150	1	66.18	137	0.94	61.88	138	0.78
Neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree	32.43	72		33.82	70		38.12	85	
Pleasurable									
Agree or strongly agree	41.18	91	1	46.38	96	1.24	55.16	123	1.76*
Neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree	58.82	130		53.62	111		44.84	100	
Enjoyable									
Agree or strongly agree	49.11	109	1	51.21	106	0.99	59.64	133	1.53*
Neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree	50.91	113		48.79	101		40.36	90	

Note. OR = odds ratio. * $p < 0.05$.

and enjoyment of reading. Finally, the effects of the program did not extend to students' reading habits after school.

Is it possible that the improvement in students' reading habits during the SSR period was a result of teachers increasingly sophisticated management skills? The results of increasingly positive affective reactions of students toward reading books for leisure could be seen as supportive evidence to disprove this doubt. If students' reading behaviors during the SSR period were a result of the teachers' management skills, there would be no reason for the increasing numbers of students who reported that reading books for leisure was pleasurable and enjoyable.

The cognitive reactions of students to reading books for leisure should be of concern. It might indicate that students did not find value in or a rationale for reading books for leisure. The discrepancy between affective and cognitive reactions to reading books for leisure might cause problems in the persistence of the habit of reading books for leisure in the future.

The results of this study also revealed a limitation of the effect of the SSR program, in that it did not have any significant effect on cultivating students' after school reading habits. Students spent fewer hours reading books for leisure after school subsequent to the launch of the SSR program. Although the SSR program could cultivate students' affective reactions to reading books for leisure, it did not cause students to spend more time actively reading books for leisure.

Nonetheless, there are some limitations in this study. First, because this is not a laboratory study, confounding variables, such as the historical events and maturation that occurred during this study, might have unavoidably influenced the results. Thus, future studies might use a quasi-experimental design or multiple-baseline design to rule out these variables. Moreover, although this study aimed to improve the reliability of the measurements by assessing both the students' self-reports and their estimation of their classmates' behaviors during the SSR period, some reporting or estimating bias could still have existed. Future studies might

include other measurements, such as observation and reports from teachers, to further improve reliability and validity. In sum, the results of this study suggest that additional programs should be designed to counter the limitations of the SSR program, target cultivating the value of reading among students, and promote students' reading habits beyond the classroom.

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